

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-15

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INFO AMEMBASSY ASUNCION
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BUENOS AIRES 7084

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, PINS, ECOM, AR
SUBJECT: CURRENT POLITICS

REF: BUENOS AIRES 1769

SUMMARY. DOMESTIC POLITICS ARE ON DEAD CENTER, EVEN
THROUGH THE CAULDRON OF INTERNAL MILITARY POLITICS
BUBBLES ON. VIDELA HAS LOST POWER AND PRESTIGE IN
THE NEW "SCHEME OF POWER", AND GIVEN THE PRESENT
DIFFUSION OF AUTHORITY IT IS PROVING IMPOSSIBLE TO
GET ON WITH THE TOUGH QUESTION OF POLITICAL REFORM
AND THE NATION'S POLITICAL FUTURE.
MANY BELIEVE THAT ONCE THE ARMY SORTS
OUT THIS YEAR'S PROMOTIONS AND RETIREMENTS VIDELA'S
HAND WILL BE STRENGTHENED, BUT THIS OUTCOME IS BY NO
MEANS CERTAIN. IN ANY EVENT IN THE PAST HE HAS BEEN
RELUCTANT TO CALL UP RAW ARMY "FIREPOWER"
TO CONSOLIDATE AND IMPROVE HIS SITUATION. PRESENT
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GOVERNMENT DISARRAY WOULD NOT MATTER IF THIS MILITARY
REGIME HAD ENDLESS TIME TO WORK OUT ITS DESTINY, BUT
ECONOMIC AND OTHER NATIONAL CONCERNS MAY DIMINISH
POPULAR WILLINGNESS TO ALLOW THE MILITARY REGIME TO GO
ON AND ON ABOUT ITS INTERNECINE ACTIVITIES WITH
RELATIVELY LITTLE THOUGHT GIVEN TO BASIC NATIONAL
REQUIREMENTS. THE BEAGLE CHANNEL DISPUTE PROVIDES A

FORTUITOUS DISTRACTION. END SUMMARY.

1. THE EMBASSY WROTE SIX MONTHS AGO (REFTEL) THAT DOMESTIC POLITICAL ISSUES HEADED ARGENTINA'S RULERS CHECKLIST. ALTHOUGH THE BEAGLE CHANNEL ISSUE IS NOW UNDOUBTEDLY AT THE TOP OF ANYONE'S LIST OF THINGS TO BE RESOLVED, DOMESTIC POLITICAL ISSUES CONTINUE TO NAG AND BITE AT THE HEELS OF PRESIDENT VIDELA.

2. THE PROBLEM AREAS SUGGESTED EARLIER REMAIN MORE OR LESS THE SAME: THE "SCHEME OF POWER", MOVEMENT TOWARD BASIC POLITICAL REFORM, THE POLITICAL EFFECTS OF ARGENTINA'S ECONOMIC SITUATION AND A SET OF CONCERNS THAT CAN BE LUMPED GENERALLY INTO THE "HUMAN RIGHTS" CATEGORY.

3. SCHEME OF POWER. THE OPINION OF ALMOST EVERYONE IS THAT VIDELA WAS WEAKENED BY THE RESHUFFLING WHICH DICTATED HE SHOULD BECOME "PRESIDENT" IN A NEW FORMAT ON AUGUST 1 (SEE BUENOS AIRES 3424). ALTHOUGH ENDLESS WRANGLING WENT INTO DEFINING THE NEW SET OF POWER RELATIONSHIPS, THEY REMAINED UNCLEAR. WE DO NOT BELIEVE VIDELA COULD CONFIDENTLY--WITHOUT, THAT IS, HAVING A NAGGING FEAR THAT HE WOULD BE OVERRULED BY THE JUNTA--RESHUFFLE HIS CABINET AND INCLUDE NEW MILITARY OFFICERS AS MEMBERS, FIRE A STATE GOVERNOR, OR EVEN MAKE AN

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IMPORTANT TRIP ABROAD. (VIDELA HAS JUST RETURNED FROM A POLITICALLY SUCCESSFUL TRIP TO ROME, WHERE HE ATTENDED THE NEW POPE'S ENTHRONEMENT. HIS JOURNEY MET WITH VIGOROUS OPPOSITION IN THE JUNTA, AND GRUDGING APPROVAL FOR VIDELA TO UNDERTAKE IT WAS GIVEN ACCORDING TO ONE ACCOUNT, ONLY UPON HIS AGREEMENT TO REPRESENT HIMSELF AS "HEAD OF GOVERNMENT", RATHER THAN "HEAD OF STATE".)

4. THIS KIND OF DIFFUSION OF POWER IS ALSO WELL OUTSIDE ARGENTINE POLITICAL EXPERIENCE. IT IS BASICALLY UNSTABLE, AND EVERYONE KNOWS IT. THERE IS GENERAL CONCERN ABOUT VIDELA'S LOSS OF POWER AND PRESTIGE, AND A FEELING THIS IS NO TIME FOR THE ARGENTINE SHIP OF STATE TO HAVE A WEAK HAND ON THE WHEEL.

5. NOT SURPRISINGLY, GIVEN GOVERNMENT'S BOGGING DOWN IN THE QUESTION OF DISTRIBUTION OF POWER, THE FAR MORE DIFFICULT QUESTION OF BASIC POLITICAL REFORM LIES VIRTUALLY UNTOUCHED. THERE IS NO DIALOGUE WITH SECTORS OF PUBLIC OPINION. NO OPENING IN GOVERNMENT FOR THE INCLUSION OF INSTITUTIONS OUTSIDE THE MILITARY. POLITICIANS ARE GLOOMY AND THERE IS A WIDER SENSE OF

DIMINISHED MOMENTUM FOR NECESSARY CHANGE. THE THREE SECRETARIES GENERAL OF THE ARMY, NAVY AND AIR FORCE ARE REPORTED ALMOST DAILY IN THE PRESS AS BEING DEEPLY INVOLVED IN RECONCILING THE POLITICAL PLANS FILED BY THEIR RESPECTIVE SERVICES. THIS IS ABOUT THE ONLY NATIONAL POLITICAL GAME IN TOWN, AND ITS PARTICIPANTS ARE THREE IN NUMBER. THIS IS NOT POLITICS, AND WE UNHESITATINGLY PREDICT THAT THE COMBINED PLAN WHEN FINALLY PUBLISHED WILL NOT SERVE ITS PURPOSE AND WILL RUN IN THE WAKE OF EVENTS, NOT AS FORERUNNERS.

6. THERE IS AND ADDITIONAL IMPEDIMENT TO BASIC REFORM: THE MILITARY "PARTY" IS DIGGING INTO ITS JOBS AND PERKS IN MUCH THE SAME WAY ANY POLITICAL PARTY WILL DO WHEN CONFIDENTIAL

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GIVEN THE CHANCE.

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7. ALL THIS WOULD HARDLY MATTER IS THE VIDELA REGIME HAD UNLIMITED TIME TO SORT ITSELF OUT. POLITICIANS ARE SAYING HOWEVER THAT ARGENTINE POLITICAL LIFE CANNOT

INDEFINITELY REMAIN FROZEN. WE SUSPECT THEY ARE RIGHT. THINGS COME UP--NEW CONCERNS, OR THE INCREASE OF OLD ONES.

8. AMONG PROSPECTIVE "CONCERNS" THE SOFT SPOT REMAINS THE ARGENTINE ECONOMY. INFLATION ROARS ON AND DAILY LIFE OF WAGE EARNERS BECOMES MORE DIFFICULT. ALTHOUGH UNEMPLOYMENT REMAINS LOW, THE DEPRESSED ECONOMY AND STABILIZATION MEASURES HAVE BEGUN NOW TO LEAD TO LARGE SCALE PLANT CLOSINGS AND LAYOFFS. THIS IS BITTER MEDICINE FOR A POPULATION FED FOR YEARS ON A CAREFREE POPULIST DIET. WE DO NOT SUGGEST THAT DRAMATIC ERUPTIONS WILL TAKE PLACE TOMORROW, BUT IT IS A FACT OF ARGENTINE PLITICAL LIFE THAT A GROWING ZONE OF ECONOMIC DISCONTENT EXISTS. WE HAVE IN MIND THAT LOWER RANKING MEMBERS OF THE MILITARY FORCES THEMSELVES ARE NOT CONFIDENTIAL

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IMMUNE FROM THE PAINS OF INFLATION AND FIXED INCOME.

9. ALONGSIDE ECONOMIC PROBLEMS, THAT OF POPULAR DISCONTENT OVER VIOLATIONS OF "HUMAN RIGHTS" IN THE GOVERNMENT'S REPRESSION REMAINS A SMALL ONE. FURTHERMORE, WE BELIEVE THERE IS EVIDENCE THAT DISAPPEARANCES AND ARRESTS DECREASED FROM PRIOR YEARS (AND THAT MORE STRINGENT CONTROLS AND GUIDELINES ARE BEING APPLIED) EVEN IF THE REPRESSIVE SYSTEM IS NOT ITSELF BEING CHANGED. OUR ASSESSMENT IS THAT THIS ISSUE WILL NOT BREAK OUT AS A MAJOR PUBLIC POLITICAL CONCERN, BUT IT IS A SMALL "COMBUSTIBLE" SITTING IN A CLOSET SOMEWHERE, READY TO GO OFF WERE THERE TO BE A GENERAL FIRE.

10. OPTIMISTS IN AND OUT OF GOVERNMENT SAY THIS IS A "MOMENT OF TRANSITION," ALL THAT IS NEEDED, THIS ARGUMENT CONTINUES, IS THAT THE ARMY LIST OF PROMOTIONS BE PUT INTO ITS FINAL FORM SO THAT IT CAN BE KNOWN WHO WILL GO UP AND WHO WILL GO OUT. (GENERAL VIOLA SAID SEPTEMBER 6 THAT THE ARMY SELECTION BOARDS HAD COMPLETED THEIR WORK THE PREVIOUS FRIDAY.) ONCE THE ARMY PUTS ITSELF IN SHAPE THE FEELING IS THAT VIDELA WILL HAVE THE POWER AND THE STRUCTURE THAT THE NEEDS TO EXTEND THE REORDERING PROCESS TO HIS CABINET AND THE WORKINGS OF GOVERNMENT. THIS IS TRUE, IF NOE LOOKS TOWARD A SITUATION IN WHICH THE ARMY WILL IMPOSE ITS POWER, BUT UP TO NOW VIDELA HAS NOT WANTED TO USE RAW ARMY HEAD-KNOCKING CAPABILITY. ANY SUCH EFFORT WOULD BE RESISTED BY BOTH THE AIR FORCE AND THE NAVY, WHOSE POSTURE IS THAT THERE MUST BE THREE-WAY EQUAL POWER SHARING.

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11. ALL THIS ADDS UP TO THE KIND OF UNCERTAINTY THAT INACTION GENERATES. IF THERE IS POLITICAL EXCITEMENT AT ALL IT IS PROVIDED BY ADMIRAL MASSERA, AS HE GOES ABOUT HIS ROUNDS OF GOODBYES PREPARATORY TO RETIRING ON SEPTMEBER 15. ODDLY, THE ADMIRAL SEEMS TO HAVE MUTED HIS DOMESTIC POLITICAL MANEUVERING IN FAVOR OF PLANS TO GO ABROAD AND GENERATE EUROPEAN AND US OPINION IN HIS FAVOR. AS ONE OLD PERONIST PLITICIAN SPECULATED, MASSEREA PROBABLY NEEDS A MONTH TO SIX WEEKS OF DISENGAGEMENT FROM JUNTA PARTICIPATION BEFORE HE COMES OUT SWINGING AT THE REGIME OF WHICH HE IS TODAY A MEMBER.

12. THE BEAGLE CHANNEL ISSUE HAS ALSO, OF COURSE, HAD ITS CHILLING EFFECTS UPON DOMESTIC POLITICAL ACTIVITY. IT IS A MAJOR PREOCCUPATION. THE MILITARY COMMITTEE-- WHICH INCLUDES VIDELA AND THE THREE JUNTA MEMBERS-- HAS BEEN IN ALMOST DAILY SESSION. UNTIL SOME ACCORD IS STRUCK WITH CHILE IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE THAT MEMBERS OF GOVERNMENT WILL BE ABLE OR WANT TO GRASP THE NETTLE OF INTERNAL POLITICS. THE BEAGLE ISSUE ITSELF IS A REAL ONE. NO ONE MADE IT UP TO PROVIDE DRAMATIC RELIEF. AT THE SAME TIME IT CAN ONLY BE FORTUITUOS IN CAPTURING HEADLINES THAT WOULD OTHERWISE HAVE TO BE MADE OUT OF MIGHTY TAME DOMESTICE GOINGS-ON. CHAPLIN

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